A GARDEN PLOT

By W. W. JACOBS

THE able-bodied men of the village were at work, the children were at school singing the multiplication-table lullaby, while the wives and mothers nursed the baby with one hand and did the housework with the other. At the d of the village an old man past work sat at a ugh deal table under the creaking signboard of e Cauliflower, gratefully drinking from a mug ale supplied by a chance traveler who sat opsite him.

The shade of the elms was pleasant and the ale od. The traveler filled his pipe and, glancing the dusty hedges and the white road baking in e sun, called for the mugs to be refilled, and shed his pouch towards his companion. After ich he paid a compliment to the appearance of e village.

"It ain't what it was when I was a boy," quavd the old man, filling his pipe with trembling gers. "I mind when the grindstone was stuck t outside the winder o' the forge instead o' be one side as it now is; and as for the shop nder—it's twice the size it was when I was a ung 'un."

He lit his pipe with the scientific accuracy of a oker of sixty years' standing, and shook his d solemnly as he regarded his altered birthce. Then his color heightened and his dim flashed.

"It's the people about 'ere 'as changed more n the place 'as," he said, with sudden fiercess; "there's a set o' men about here nowadays are no good to anybody; reg'lar raskels. And you've the mind to listen I can tell you of one two as couldn't be beat in London itself.

"There's Tom Adams for one. He went and rted wot 'e called a Benevolent Club. Threece a week each we paid agin sickness or accit, and Tom was secretary. Three weeks arter club was started he caught a chill and was up for a month. He got back to work a k, and then 'e sprained something in 'is leg; arter that was well 'is inside went wrong. didn't think much of it at first, not underding figures, but at the end o' six months club hadn't got a farthing, and they was in n's debt one pound seventeen-and-six.

"He isn't the only one o' that sort in the place, er. There was Herbert Richardson. He went own, and came back with the idea of a Goose b for Christmas. We paid twopence a week that for pretty near ten months, and then bert went back to town agin, and all we 'ear im through his sister, is that he's still there doing well ,and don't know when he'll be k.

"But the artfullest and worst man in this place nd that's saying a good deal, mind you—is Pretty. Deep is no word for 'im. There's way of being up to 'im. It's through 'im that lost our Flower Show; and, if you'd like to the rights o' that, I don't suppose there's body in this place as knows as mucn about it I do—barring Bob hisself that is, but 'e ldn't tell it to you as plain as I can.

"We'd only 'ad the Flower Show one year, and e anybody thought that the next one was to be last. The first year you might smell the place ile off in the summer, and on the day of the w people came from a long way round, and ght money to spend at the Cauliflower and r places.

"It was started just after we got our new par- and Mrs. Pawlett, the parson's wife, 'is name g Pawlett, thought as she'd encourage men ve their 'omes and be better 'usbands by giv- a prize every year for the best cottage gar- Three pounds was the prize, and a metal pot with writing on it.

"As I said, we only 'ad it two years. The fust the garden as got it was a picter ,and Bill mbers, 'im as won the prize, used to say as 'e out o' pocket by it, taking 'is time and the ey 'e spent on flowers. Not as we believed you understand, 'specially as Bill did 'is best to get it the next year, too. 'E didn't it, and though p'r'aps most of us was glad it ed out in the end.

"The Flower Show was to be 'eld on the 5th o' just as a'most everything about here was at best. On the 15th of June Bill Chambers' eu seemed to be leading, but Peter Smith and Gubbins and Sam Jones and Henery Walker almost as good, and it was understood that e than one of 'em had got a surprise which 'd produce at the last moment, too late for others to copy. We used to sit up here of an ing at this Cauliflower public-house and put ey on it. I put mine on Henery Walker, and time I spent in 'is garden 'elping 'im is a sin a shame to think of.

"Of course some of 'em used to make fun of it, Bob Pretty was the worst of 'em all. He was ys a lazy, good-for-nothing man, and 'is gar- was a disgrace. He'd chuck down any rubbish in it: old bones, old tins, bits of an old bucket, anything to make it untidy. He used to larf at 'em awful about their gardens and about being took up by the parson's wife. Nobody ever see 'im do any work, real 'ard work, but the smell from 'is place at dinner time was always nice, and I believe that he knew more about game than the parson hissef did.

"It was the day arter this one I'm speaking about, the 16th o' July, that the trouble all began, and it came about in a very eggstrordinary way. George English, a quiet man getting into years, who used when 'e was younger to foller the sea, and whose only misfortin was that 'e was a brother-in-law o' Bob Pretty's, his sister marrying Bob while 'e was at sea and knowing nothing about it, 'ad a letter come from a mate of his who 'ad gone to Australia to live. He'd 'ad leters from Australia before, as we all know from Miss Wicks at the postoffice, but this one upset him altogether. He didn't seem like to know what to do about it.

"While he was wondering Bill Chambers passed. He always did pass George's 'ouse about that time in the evening, it being on 'is way 'ome, and he saw George standing at 'is gate with a letter in 'is' and looking very puzzled.

"'Evenin', George,' ses Bill.

"'Evenin',' ses George.

"'Not bad news, I 'ope?' ses Bill, noticing 'is manner and thinking it was strange.

"'No,' ses George. 'I've just 'ad a very eggstrordinary letter from Australia,' he ses, 'that's all.'

"Bill Chambers was always a very inquisitive sort o' man, and he stayed and talked to George until George, arter fust making him swear oaths that 'e wouldn't tell a soul, took 'im inside and showed 'im the letter.

"It was more like a story-book than a letter. George's mate, John Biggs by name, wrote to say that an uncle of his who had just died, on 'is deathbed told him that thirty years ago 'e 'ad been in this very village, staying at this 'ere very Cauliflower, whose beer we're drinking now. In the night, when everybody was asleep, he got up and went quiet-like and buried a bag of five hundred and seventeen sovereigns and one half-sovereign in one of the cottage gardens till 'e could come for it agin. He didn't say 'ow he come by the money, and, when Bill spoke about that, George English said that, knowing the man, 'e was afraid 'e 'adn't come by it honest, but anyway his friend John Biggs wanted it, and, wot was more, 'ad asked 'im in the letter to get it for 'im.

"'And wot I'm to do about it, Bill,' he ses, 'I don't know. All the directions he gives is, that 'e thinks it was the tenth cottage on the right-'and side of the road, coming down from the Cauliflower. 'E thinks it's the tenth, but 'e's not quite sure. Do you think I'd better make it known and offer a reward of ten shillings, say, to any one who finds it?'

"'No,' ses Bill, shaking 'is 'ead. 'I should hold on a bit if I was you, and think it over. I shouldn't tell another single soul, if I was you.'

"'I be'leeve you're right,' ses George. 'John Biggs would never forgive me if I lost that money for 'im. You'll remember about keeping it secret, Bill.'

"Bill swore 'e wouldn't tell a soul, and 'e went off 'ome and 'ad his supper, and then 'e walked up the road to the Cauliflower and back, and then up and back again, thinking over what George 'ad been telling 'im, and noticing, what 'e'd never taken the trouble to notice before, that 'is very 'ouse was the tenth one from the Cauliflower.

"Mrs. Chambers woke up at 2 o'clock next morning and told Bill to get up further, and then found 'e wasn't there. She was rather surprised at first, but she didn't think much of it, and thought, what happened to be true, that 'e was busy in the garden, it being a light night. She turned over and went to sleep again, and at 5 when she woke up she could distinctly 'ear Bill working 'is 'ardest. Then she went to the winder and nearly dropped as she saw Bill in his shirt and trousers digging away like mad. A quarter of the garden was all dug up, and she shoved open the winder and screamed out to know what 'e was doing.

"Bill stood up straight and wiped 'is face with his shirt-sleeve and started digging again, and then his wife just put something on and rushed downstairs as fast as she could go.

"'What on earth are you a-doing of, Bill?' she screams.

"'Go 'indoors,' ses Bill, still digging.

"''Ave you gone mad?' she ses, half crying.

"Bill just stopped to throw a lump of mould at her, and then went on digging till Henery Walker, who also thought 'e 'ad gone mad, and didn't want to stop 'im too soon, put 'is 'ead over the 'edge and asked 'im the same thing.

"'Ask no questions and you'll 'ear no lies, and keep your ugly face your own side of the 'edge,' ses Bill. 'Take it indoors and frighten the children with it,' 'e ses. 'I don't want it staring at me.'

"Henery walked off offended, and Bill went on with 'is digging. 'E wouldn't go to work, and 'e 'ad his breakfast in the garden, and his wife spent all the morning in the front answering the neighbors' questions and begging of 'em to go in and say something to Bill. One of 'em did go, and came back a'most directly and stood there for hours telling diff'rent people wot Bill 'ad said to 'er, and asked whether 'e couldn't be locked up for it.

"By tea time Bill was dead beat, and that stiff 'e could 'ardly raise 'is bread and butter to 'is mouth. Several o' the chaps looked in in the evening, but all they could get out of 'im was, that it was a new way o' cultivating 'is garden 'e 'ad just 'eard of, and that those who lived the longest would see the most. By night time 'e'd nearly finished the job, and 'is garden was just ruined.

"Afore people 'ad done talkin about Bill, I'm blest if Peter Smith didn't go and cultivate 'is garden in exactly the same way. The parson and 'is wife was away on their 'oliday and nobody could say a word. The curate who 'ad come over to take 'is place for a time ,and who took the names of people for the Flower Show, did point out to 'im that he was spoiling 'is chances, but Peter was so rude to 'im that 'e didn't stay long enough to say much.

"When Joe Gubbins started digging up 'is garden people began to think they were all bewitched, and I went round to see Henery Walker to tell 'im wot a fine chance 'e'd got, and to remind 'im that I'd put another ninepence on 'im the night before. All 'e said was, 'More fool you,' and went on digging a 'ole in 'is garden big enough to put a 'ouse in.

"In a fortnight's time there wasn't a garden worth looking at in the place, and it was quite clear there'd be no Flower Show that year, and of all the silly, bad-tempered men in the place them as 'ad dug up their pretty gardens was the wust.

"It was just a few days before the day fixed for the Flower Show ,and I was walking up the road when I see Joe and Henery Walker and one or two more leaning over Bob Pretty's fence, and talking to 'im. I stopped, too, to see what they were looking at, and found they was watching Bob's two boys a-weeding of 'is garden. It was a disgraceful, untidy sort of a place, as I said before, with a few marigolds and nasturtiums, and sich-like put in anywhere, and Bob was walking up and down smoking of 'is pipe and watching 'is wife hoe atween the plants and cut off dead marigold blooms.

"'That's a pretty garden you've got there, Bob,' ses Joe, grinning.

"'I've seen wuss,' ses Bob.

"'Going in for the Flower Show, Bob?' ses Henery, with a wink at us.

"'O' course I am,' ses Bob, 'olding 'is 'ead up; my marigolds ought to pull me through,' he ses.

"Henery wouldn't believe it at first, but when he saw Bob show 'is missus 'ow to pat the path down with the back o' the spade and hold the nails for 'er while she nailed a climbing nasturtium to the fence, he went off and fetched Bill Chambers and one or two others, and they all leaned over the fence breathing their 'ardest and a-saying of all the nasty things to Bob they could think of.

"'It's the best-kep' garden in the place,' ses Bob. 'I ain't afraid o' your new way o' cultivating flowers, Bill Chambers. Old-fashioned ways suit me best; I learnt 'ow to grow flowers from my father.'

"'You ain't 'ad the cheek to give your name in, Bob?' ses Sam Jones, staring.

"Bob didn't answer 'im. 'Pick those bits o' grass out o' the path, old gal,' he ses to 'is wife; 'they look untidy, and untidiness I can't bear.'

"He walked up and down smoking 'is pipe and pretending not to notice Henery Walker, wot 'ad moved farther along the fence, and was staring at some drabble-tailed-looking geraniums as if 'e'd seen 'em afore but wasn't sure where.

"'Admiring my geraniums, Henery?' ses Bob, at last.

"'Where'd you get 'em?' ses Henery, 'ardly able to speak.

"'My florist's,' ses Bob, in a off-hand manner.

"'Your wot?' asks Henery.

"'My florist,' ses Bob.

"'And who might 'e be when 'e's at 'ome?' asked Henery.

"''Tain't so likely I'm going to tell you that,' ses Bob. 'Be reasonable, Henery, and ask yourself whether it's likely I should tell you 'is name. Why, I've never seen sich fine geraniums afore. I've been nursing 'em inside all the summer, and just planted 'em out.'

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